

**Families and
Children
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MDRC's Research Agenda for Families & Children

HOME VISITING AND COORDINATED AND INTEGRATED EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS

THE CHALLENGE

The skills and abilities children develop in their earliest years lay the foundation for their future well-being. Likewise, early negative experiences can undermine them in later life. Parents play a central role in shaping their children's development, so helping them overcome their own sources of stress is a powerful way to improve how families function and support young children.

For these reasons, funders at all levels (federal, state, and local governments, foundations, and others) are investing in systems to support expectant parents and families with young children. But services for families and young children have historically been fragmented. There are challenges coordinating services into a cohesive whole. It is also not always obvious which ones will best support the needs and strengths of different families. Making sure families get the right services is still complicated as a result, especially on a large scale.

MDRC'S LEARNING AGENDA FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

MDRC is focusing on addressing these questions that are at the forefront of the field:

- How should local, integrated early childhood systems be structured to take full advantage of promising programs and available services?
- How can communities target, triage, and coordinate services to make sure that families get the right support: all of the services they need and not the ones they don't?
- What individual program models are effective, for whom, and under what circumstances? Which ones are effective on a large scale?

Building systems of services that work together

Integrated early childhood systems represent one of the most promising approaches to reaching at-risk families and young children and getting them different kinds of support they need. But such approaches are challenging. For them to work, families need to be linked with the right services. Service providers have to integrate their data systems. And multiple community agencies and partners have to work together to coordinate their efforts over time. MDRC is building evidence about these sorts of efforts.

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- In Guilford County, North Carolina, the countywide **Get Ready Guilford Initiative** aims to integrate services for families of children from birth to age 8. MDRC is evaluating the effects of the initiative and will identify lessons for the field about how the county is making the integration happen.
- New York City's **Pediatric Bundles** initiative is trying to get mental health, parenting, and child development services to families at routine pediatric well-child visits for infants and toddlers ages 0 to 3. MDRC is working with the city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to learn how this integration is carried out.

Getting families and children the right services

Families are diverse and have unique strengths and challenges. As a result, they all need different forms of support. They need to be approached and engaged differently to start, and they need services that match their particular circumstances. MDRC is tackling these issues in several ways.

- In the **Family Level Assessment and State of Home Visiting** project, MDRC is investigating how families enroll in the federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program. The goal is to identify and address families' barriers to recruitment and enrollment, ultimately to make sure that families have access to the programs that can support them.
- In **Head Start Connects**, MDRC is studying how, in addition to early childhood education, Head Start programs provide a wide range of two-generational services, and tailor those services to address parents' needs in education, employment, financial stability, housing and food assistance, emergency or crisis intervention, substance-abuse treatment, and physical and mental health.
- In the **Child First** project, MDRC is now using predictive analytics to inform how home visiting programs can make sure families get the kinds of support they need and can benefit most from.

Building evidence about promising models on a large scale

MDRC continues to build evidence about what individual program models for expectant parents and families with young children are most effective, for whom, and under what circumstances, especially when delivered on a large scale.

- In the **MIHOPE** and **MIHOPE-Strong Start** projects, MDRC is evaluating four different models of home visiting on a nationwide scale to see how they affect child health and development, parenting practices, and family well-being, among other outcomes.
- **HealthySteps** is an interdisciplinary pediatric primary care program that aims to make sure infants and toddlers receive nurturing parenting and have healthy development. MDRC is doing an early study of three HealthySteps locations in New York City.
- **Child First** visits the homes of children ages 0 to 6 who have risk factors in multiple areas. An earlier, small-scale study showed some benefits for children and families. MDRC is now evaluating the program on a larger scale — at multiple locations in two states.

MDRC is committed to finding solutions to some of the most difficult problems facing the nation — from reducing poverty and bolstering economic self-sufficiency to improving public education and college graduation rates. We design promising new interventions, evaluate existing programs using the highest research standards, and provide technical assistance to build better programs and deliver effective interventions at scale.